A Report on the Church of the Highlands

March 3, 2005

Because of my calling and position in the Body of Christ, spiritually gifted and experienced in a discernment/apologetics ministry, I have been repeatedly called upon to provide a perspective on the teachings and practices of a new church in the area – the Church of the Highlands (COTH).

What began as a routine exploration has turned into a deeply reflective and challenging experience for me personally. These are not simple, black and white issues that have surfaced. Numerous issues have arisen, several of which are woven into the bigger picture that I believe God wants His Church to address.

Let me say at the beginning that I have several concerns or burdens I need to share before I present my perspectives. The first concern is that people will not thoroughly and prayerfully read and study all of my paper(s). People, even Christians, generally are lazy about studying, thinking, and reflecting carefully. We are affected by our culture to want quick fixes, a synopsis, sound bites, the "Cliff's notes" version. As Christians we are all called to carefully study, weigh, reflect on God's Word and issues/doctrines it addresses, and to test our own as well as other teachers who deliver that word (2 Tim. 3:15-16; Acts 17:11; Hebrews 5:12-14). HOW we test it is an important issue as well.

A second concern is that too many people are not theologically oriented (in a good way) and won't understand the significance of these issues. It has become all too clear that too many Christians today have been negatively conditioned and affected by postmodernism in our culture. That is to say that people have begun to prioritize experience over thinking, theology, and analysis. To them truth is determined by pragmatism, by what appears to "work" and by good "feelings." Everyone has a theology. So the question is what is the content of one's theology. Yes, one can err on the purely rational, cognitive side as well but the answer is to have **both** sound doctrine, thinking, **and** resulting experience. To be a true "God thing" does not mean that it has to be beyond our "thought boxes." If anyone ever says so, they open the door for manipulation, and for much deception. Yes of course God's ways and thoughts are infinitely higher than ours (Is. 55:9), but He has revealed propositional truths for us to truly know and follow Him (Deut. 29:29; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; John 8:31-32).

A third concern is that people will come to these papers defensively, having caricatured me as a "witch hunter, a fault-finding spirit, heresy police, a nit picker," etc. I have already heard these comments. Additionally there has already circulated a rather offensive, inappropriate, somewhat inaccurate and anonymous piece calling the COTH a cult. I knew nothing about it, had nothing to do with it, but some had begun to attribute it to me, knowing that I was in the process of writing a paper/report.

An important fourth concern is that addressing or even confronting issues like this *can* lead to more division rather than a constructive resolution, and God's work will be quenched in some way rather than enhanced. But if these issues are approached Biblically/constructively, then we can move forward in an even more powerful way. It is my prayer that people will come away stronger in the Lord, based on His life-giving, power-working truth. I have already heard comments like Craig Branch doesn't endorse COTH. But I have never used those words. Instead, I am saying that I pray that interaction will occur that will protect and strengthen the ministry at COTH. But to neglect to address these issues though will inevitably result in division, spiritual weakness and even shipwreck of the faith for some.

It was about a year ago that I began to receive concerned inquiries about the Church of the Highlands. But I also heard some positive things as well. My staff and I were already somewhat aware of the reputation and work of one of the two parent/sending churches, Bethany World Prayer Center, in Baton Rouge. But in the past eight months, we have been getting more and more calls to the point that we receive at least 2-3 calls per day, either requesting clarity and information, or expressing concerns.

The pastor of COTH, Chris Hodges, seems to be a committed Christian who has a genuine passion for Jesus and a zeal for His people and Kingdom. I have now met with Chris four times, for several hours, to discuss a number of the concerns that have been raised. I have also met with two of the other COTH pastor/staff elders. I tried to meet with their youth pastor but was told that Chris would answer any questions I had for him. I have transcribed Chris's six messages on the Holy Spirit, and three question and answer Wednesday night sessions titled, "Bring it On," as well as read through the Cloth's growth track – Church 101, Discipleship 201, (301 has never been made available to me), the Small Group Leadership Manual, their doctrinal papers on the "Baptism of the Holy Spirit," and two years of Chris's sermon outlines. I have read their By Laws and Articles of Incorporation and their Statement of Faith. I have also interacted with a number of COTH members (several of whom I know pretty well and think highly of), and ex-members. In fact, in the past two days I have been blessed with being asked to come alongside three different COTH members to minister with them on issues with which they needed help, because they are out there focused on the Kingdom.

I have closely interacted and consulted with a number of "charismatic" Christian friends, pastors, and theologians, whom I respect, on these issues. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Sam Storms who was formerly the associate pastor under Mike Bickle, of the Kansas City Prophet movement, and of John Wimber, leader of the Vineyard Churches, and most recently was a theology professor at Wheaton College for several years. Sam has several books published on the Holy Spirit's gifting and now is establishing a ministry called "Enjoying God."

He is a like-minded colleague of John Piper. Sam is Reformed theologically and a "charismatic."

And I have done reading in a good number of books on the issues in question such as: Ted Haggard's *Primary Purpose*, *The Life-Giving Church*, and *Dog Training, Fly Fishing, and Sharing Christ* (all of which Chris Hodges gave to me); *When the Spirit Comes with Power* by Jack Deere; *Spiritual Power and Church Growth* by Peter Wagner; *Holy Fire* by Michael Brown; *Christianity with Power* by Charles Kraft; *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* by Wayne Grudem; *Bible Doctrine* and *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem; *Evangelical Reunion* by John Frame; *Symphonic Theology* by Vern Poythress; *Showing the Spirit* by D.A. Carson; *God's Empowering Presence* by Gordon Fee; *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* by Michael Green; *Keep In Step with the Spirit* by J.I. Packer; *The Beginners Guide to Spiritual Gifts* by Dr. Sam Storms; *Evangelical Concerns* by Melvin Tinker; *The Holy Spirit* by Sinclair Ferguson; *Power Religion* ed. by Michael Horton; *The Charismatic Gift of Prophesy* by Kenneth Gentry; *The Final Word* by O. Palmer Robertson; *Initial Evidence* by Gary McGee; *Territorial Spirits and World Evangelism* by Chuck Lowe; *The Great Deceiver* by Kenneth Copley; *Breakthrough* by Derek Morphew; two editions of *Ministries Today* on the Five-Fold Ministry (Prophets and Apostles); *The Apostolic Ministry* by Rick Joyner; *Apostles and Prophets and the Coming Moves of God* by Bill Hamon; *The Eternal Church* by Bill Hamon; *Conversion, Initiation and the Baptism of the Holy Spirit* by Howard Ervin; *Perspectives of Spirit Baptism – 5 Views* ed. by Chad Brand, plus numerous articles written by charismatics and other theologians and church leaders.

I am writing two papers. The first will describe my understanding of the structure and focus of the COTH, its doctrine, its contributions as well as my concerns. I have submitted this paper to Chris Hodges so that he could clarify or correct any errors I may have made in my description of their structure, focus or doctrine, before making the paper available. Chris did comment on several points. I cut out some of the report, modified other portions and injected some responses made by Chris. I will make the paper available only to those who request it. Contrary to rumors, I do not intend to publish it in our journal, *Areopagus*.

I also intend to write a second paper that will carefully respond to the theological/practical concerns as well as to some of the issues of the COTH critics. I am afraid no one will fully like this paper, as I see positives and negatives on a number of differing sides of the issues. But my prayer is that this paper and what could result from it can be used as an agent and catalyst to effect a more powerful synergy between Charismatics, Reformed, Pentecostal and Arminian oriented brothers in Christ.

The Reformed, charismatic theologian, Wayne Grudem states the following in his book, *Bible Doctrine*:

> "[T]hose in the charismatic and Pentecostal camps, and those in the cessationist camp (primarily Reformed and dispensational Christians) really need each other, and they would do well to appreciate each other more…[I]t certainly is not helpful to the church as a whole for both sides to think they can learn nothing from the other" (p. 406).

A legitimate question is, who am I and what business do I have in producing a paper(s) like this? I have been a Christian a little over 28 years. I was led to the Lord and discipled by the former pastor of Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Frank Barker, and was a member of Briarwood for most of those years. My family is now a member of Oak Mountain Presbyterian. I have been trained and have had significant experience in a number of ministry areas including lifestyle evangelism, discipleship, Evangelism Explosion, pastoring, and in apologetics. I have been on many missions trips to Mexico, Barbados, Romania, Hungary, Peru, and Guatemala. I was singles minister for three years at Briarwood, and later developed a singles ministry on Hilton Head Island working with 5 churches, was on staff with Search (then New Life) Ministry (apologetics/lifestyle evangelism) for two years, Alabama director and vice-president of Watchman Fellowship, a counter-cult apologetics ministry, for 15 years, have earned a Masters in Religious Education degree from Birmingham Theological Seminary, served as a long time board member of Evangelical Ministries to New Religions (a consortium of many theologians and counter-cult ministries around the country), and Board member of Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center (our nation's only rehab center for victims of abusive cults), and serve on the faculty of the Birmingham Theological Seminary. Five years ago I founded (and continue to direct) the Apologetics Resource Center here in Birmingham, which serves the entire spectrum of Christian churches in the scope of apologetics – knowing truth, defending truth, advancing the truth, and being the truth. I am Reformed theologically but am part of the smaller camp of Reformed Christians who do not believe that the Scriptures definitively teach that the supernatural sign gifts have ceased (more on that within the paper). Therefore I am open to their perpetuity, but also believe that there is some error in teaching and practice within certain "charismatic" perspectives. This is especially true in the area of prophecy, apostolic authority, baptism of the Holy Spirit, the understanding of tongues, and health and prosperity teachings.

Over my many years of ministry I have had the pleasure of ministering arm in arm with fellow Christians who hold to a diversity of theological perspectives. As I put it, I have ministered together closely with those from "pew jumping" Charismatic churches to the "frozen chosen," and everything in-between.

While at Watchman, years ago, I contacted one of the leaders of the Pensacola Brownsville Assembly revival, Michael Brown, because of all the controversy that had begun to circulate. After checking me out, Michael invited me there as his guest for three days, met extensively with me, and opened all the doors of the ministry there for scrutiny. My conclusion was that there was some error there, some manipulation at times, some emotionalism without real fruit, but there were also many real conversions, some true healings, some ongoing ministry fruitfulness being established, as well as genuine opportunities for theological grounding and practical ministry training being set up. We chose not to publish anything negative about it though we did counsel folks who inquired about our concerns. Unfortunately some of the errors we observed eventually served to break up the leadership there, and the "revival" was not sustained, although it went on several years.

I was also quite involved in discerning the problems and helping victims of a problematic charismatic shepherding movement years ago, called the Florida Five (Bob Mumford, Derek Prince, Charles Simpson, Don Basham, Ern Baxter, and John Poole). This was alleged to be an authoritative "prophetic movement" that ended up in abusing Scripture, authority, and many believers. They too taught that God was restoring a true Biblical church governing structure through the Five-fold ministry, including apostles and prophets. Four of the five later repented of their errors (except Charles Simpson). In their published "Statement of Concern and Regret," they stated in part, "We realize that controversies and problems have arisen among Christians in various areas as a result of our teaching in relation to subjects such as submission, authority, discipling, and shepherding. We deeply regret these problems and insofar as they are due to fault on our part, we ask forgiveness."

Charles Simpson, whose church was in Mobile, and one of the worst abusers, later wrote, "[C]ultic groups, the groups that produce serious perversions of the faith are not the results of true spiritual authority but of perverted authority." He then went on to note he had apologized publicly for abuses because "my teachings [on authority] had been misused on some occasions. I felt that I had not sufficiently guarded the truths of authority and that abuses had occurred. Disciplemaking without accountability and a corporate mentality, should be considered intolerable in the church for biblical and historical reasons." What Simpson (and others) still failed to understand is that his **foundational** teaching on authority (which included "prophetic anointing") was fundamentally flawed, not just that some followers took it too far.

Why am I using this example? I do so as a warning because there are issues you are about to consider regarding foundational teachings and practices at COTH which could have the same potential for negative consequences as Brownsville, the Florida Five, and the Latter Rain Movement, another major 5-Fold, apostolic-prophetic movement in the past. This is especially true

if the pastor, or overseer, or "apostle," or whoever has leadership and teaching responsibilities at COTH do not have a balanced, mature understanding of doctrine and how certain spiritual gifts are manifested, tested and governed.

The Lord has given me the pleasure and privilege of seeing many people helped and healed from the abuse of false teachers over the years as well as being a part of many people coming to saving knowledge of Jesus Christ—including members of the Mormon church, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Way, Church of Christ, new-agers, occultists, Scientologists, atheists, agnostics, and just "regular" unbelievers.

Over the years of engagement, I have gained much knowledge and experience in dealing with the methods and negative effects of Scripture twisting (2 Peter 3:16) and the life-giving importance of being transformed through sound doctrine (John 8:31-32; Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:22-23). I have also witnessed the damaging effects of improper authority and exercise of both control and manipulation in the lives of too many well meaning but naïve Christians.

One accusation made against those of us in the apologetics community is that we are arrogant, divisive, and even Pharisaical (legalistic, straining at gnats while swallowing the camel). Unfortunately, sometimes this is a valid criticism. In his book, *Holy Fire*, Michael Brown (who was the theological leader of the Brownsville revival), commenting on the nature of many fault-finders, described some of the characteristics of what he called "the Hypocrite's Checklist," as one who "claims to have an exclusive corner on the truth," and one who "is cynical and skeptical." Other characteristics he lists are, "more concerned with outward forms and traditions rather than the power of God, mercy and compassion …. dangerously denominational….produces bondage rather than freedom….wants his spirituality to be seen….highly critical….and self-righteous" (pp. 41-66).

I resonate with Michael on those descriptions and do not believe I fit those descriptions. I do relate to a couple of those phrases in a qualified way. While I do not have "an exclusive corner on the truth," I do agree with Scripture that we can and should know sound doctrine—truth (2 Timothy 2:15, 4:1-4; 1 Timothy 4:1, 6-10; Acts 20:20, 27; Colossians 2:6-7; 1 Timothy 6:3; Titus 1:9). Truth is what produces real freedom rather than bondage (John 8:31-32; Ephesians 4:17-24).

I also can relate somewhat with Brown's description of cynicism and skepticism. It comes with the territory. I have repeatedly seen the steady stream of false teachers and their spiritually harmed followers, deceiving and being deceived, twisting Scriptures, following movements and personalities, just as the Bible repeatedly warns. We humans in our ignorance and sinful flesh are so prone to wander and fall for the counterfeit. But I must quickly say I also embrace the paradox of being very optimistic at the same time. I really believe God can, does, and will do the miraculous in redeeming the messes we frail humans can make through self-deception and through the enemy.

But to the rest of those descriptions, I definitely do not adhere to nor identify myself with. Fortunately Brown strikes a balance. He writes, “There is a place for bringing correction. Exercising discernment is necessary. Some things *are* wrong…correction brings life and improvement, and discernment produces growth and progress. Both are motivated by love—for the Lord, for his people, and for those in error.” Amen!

Take the time to really read those passages listed above and 2 Timothy 2:23-26. We are called to reprove both cult followers **and** fellow Christians who are “teaching things they should not teach.”

Note that Paul publicly challenged even the great apostle Peter who began to slip off into error (Galatians 2:11-14). Then there was Apollos who was “fervent in spirit” and “teaching accurately” about many things. But he was also teaching half truths about some important things so Priscilla and Aquila “took him aside and explained the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:24-26). Because Apollos listened and adjusted, he was more powerful and fruitful. Paul often complimented the favorable aspects of the churches he wrote to, but then also pointed out their errors and corrected their fallacies. Again, it is my prayer that as a result of these issues being addressed, there will be Spirit-led, fruitful dialogue between the brethren, and as a result God’s kingdom will be magnified.

In closing my introduction, I want to reemphasize my perspective in this with an example. Suppose one Christian holds a particular doctrinal position that the gift of tongues or prophecy have ceased with the death of the apostles and the completion of Scripture. Another Christian holds that those gifts have not ceased but need to be recovered and practiced today. The normal conclusion is that one of these two Christians must be wrong.

My own view on this conclusion is in agreement with Reformed theologians John Frame and Vern Poythress—something called “Perspectivalism.” This view says that yes, ultimately, “A” cannot be “non-A,” and on that final conclusion, both cannot be right. But there can be and often is an element of perspectival truths in both parties’ positions. Both parties can have some elements of truth mixed in with error that each party needs to consider. I believe we will maximize our understanding of Scripture if we are able to see the same truth from a maximum number of perspectives. For example, in the dispute over divine sovereignty and human responsibility, there are elements of truth on each side which do not negate the other but serve to restrain the true side from becoming skewed into error, and helps to apply that truth more holistically.

Like the late Francis Schaeffer wrote, God’s truth is like a sphere and we individually pass through that sphere in linear planes. Ironically even a famous skeptic John Stuart Mill, like Balaam’s donkey, correctly expressed it, “He who only knows his side of an issue, knows little of that.”

The Church of the Highlands

The COTH began formally in February 2001, in Birmingham. The pastor, Chris Hodges, moved here with 34 people, mainly from two churches where he had previously worked, to start a new church here. Those two churches were Bethany World Prayer Center in Baton Rouge where Chris first "began his ministry as a youth pastor," and New Life Church, pastored by Ted Haggard (who also began at Bethany World Prayer Center), where Chris served as Youth Pastor and Senior Associate Pastor for seven years.

Chris had returned to Bethany as an Associate Pastor for six years prior to coming to Birmingham, serving as a Cell Group Pastor and a worship leader. Chris is 40, married to Tammy, and has five children.

On COTH's first Sunday, over 350 people attended service. In the first year, attendance grew to 600 weekly with 371 professions of faith. In its third year, attendance grew to 1400 weekly and had 1600 in 85 small groups. At the close of 2004, COTH had around 3000 in attendance, 230 small groups with 2600 in attendance, and 859 new professions of faith for 2004. This is phenomenal! And some, especially those who are heavily focused on evangelism – like me, are tempted to say, "How can anyone be critical of that – they must be doing it right. Leave them alone!" Believe me. I AM impressed with some of the things COTH is doing and challenge the rest of the Church to take a good hard look at these things and see what we can learn. In fact, I have recommended to the staffs at several churches that they get with the COTH corresponding staff and interact, finding out what the other is doing. Too few have indicated an interest at this point. I believe some of the emphases at the COTH, their perspectival truths, can help and deepen the Church's knowledge and experience with God.

BUT we must look at the bigger picture – the whole sphere of truth. This is necessary for deeper and sustained growth, spiritual health and vitality, to the glory of God. I believe if those at the COTH do not also hear and correct the errors in some of their points of focus, then problems, weaknesses, and damage will occur. This goes both ways.

COTH's Purpose Statement

The COTH's published purpose statement is in part, "to reach people in the Birmingham area with the life-giving message of Jesus that they may become fully devoted followers of Christ." They state it is "based on two teachings of Jesus." The first is the great commandment, to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor as yourself.

Unfortunately, the second is quoted from Mark 16:15-20, regarding the evangelistic "Great Commission" to go into all the world with the gospel. I say unfortunate because it appears that the choice of this passage is to give authority to a COTH doctrinal emphasis that is

controversial. Rather than use the reliable Mt. 28:18-20 passage to describe their mission, they chose to use Mark 16:15-20.

Why is this a problem? The reliability of Mark 16:9-20 has a number of serious problems. Most Bible scholars dispute its reliability for many reasons including: (1) it was not found in the earliest manuscripts; (2) a different style of writing suddenly begins with vs. 9; (3) a number of early church fathers declared them unauthentic; and (4) it advances a doctrinal error that believing (faith) and water baptism is necessary for salvation (vs. 16).

My initial impression was that COTH probably chose this passage because it contains an important focus of their church's mission – that healing, the gift of tongues, and casting out demons is an important normative attestation to an authentic New Testament church (vs. 17). Many charismatic Pentecostals believe this yet it is telling to notice that they don't apply a portion of that text (vs. 18), "they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them." There are a few groups on Sand Mountain that try to be consistent with this passage.

[But Chris, in response has informed me that this choice of passage was only intended to focus on the Great Commission and not the other emphasis. He indicated a reconsideration of this selected passage.] The COTH website also states they have planted churches but Chris told me they have not.

COTH's Statement of Faith

COTH holds to a standard evangelical Statement of Faith including the inerrancy and final authority of the Bible, the Trinity, salvation as a gift "by grace through faith in Jesus Christ," repentance, etc. Also included in the Statement is the "Baptism in the Holy Spirit." But some of the "proof-texts" listed do not correspond to or support their meaning of this doctrine. For example, Mk. 16:17 is used (pointed out earlier in this paper). Acts 2:38-39 does not refer to the baptism of the Holy Spirit distinct from the regenerating gift of the Holy Spirit (and tongues are not accompanying it), Acts 10:44-47 and Acts 11:15-17 actually describes the baptism of the Holy Spirit as the same as (synonymous with) receiving the regenerating gift of the Holy Spirit at salvation – not a subsequent endowment. I will respond to the Acts 1,2,8, and 19 references later.

Also listed in the Statement is "The Gifts of the Holy Spirit" which correctly affirms the presence and purpose of spiritual gifts in the church. Particularly important is the admonition stated that the gifts must "always operate in harmony with the Scriptures and should never be used in violation of Biblical parameters." The Statement even references
I Corinthians 12 and 14 but I'm afraid the leadership does not correctly interpret these texts in their emphasis and application.

Of particular concern is the section titled "God's Will for Provision." The premise statements read, "It is the Father's will for

believers to become whole, healthy, and successful in **all** areas of life. But because of the fall, many may not receive the full benefits of God's will while on Earth." The statement lists physical and financial as 2 of the 4 areas of life and proof texts them with the same verses that the heretical Word-Faith (name-it and claim-it) teachers use.

One of the important questions I asked Chris is, "How does what you teach differ from the Word-Faith teachers?" I'll let you discern the answer based on his responses, his sermons, and the COTH curricula, and staffing.

Church Structure-By-Laws

According to the Articles of Incorporation, members in the COTH are "all people who contribute financially to the church…[and who] has attended long enough to receive an annual contributions statement." Also in the membership manual/study, Church 101, it reads under "What We Practice," that "Committed believers tithe their income." It also states under "What Is Expected of A Member?' that expectations and "responsibilities are spelled out in the Membership Covenant," which stipulates that a member will "give regularly… a tenth" (tithe**). [Chris responded that COTH definitely doesn't require a tithe for membership. In fact he says one of his personal traits is that he doesn't emphasize giving enough.]** I recommend then that he reword the covenant statement.

In 2000, Article VI read, "Presbyters (Board of Directors)." In 2001 this title was amended to "Trustees" and only one of the original "presbyters – trustees" remained. In 2002 the "trustees" changed again and 2 of the 5 in 2001 remained while 4 new trustees were added.

One concern I have is how much control any leader has and what accountability structure is in place. In the COTH Amended By-Laws of Dec. 2, 2001, the senior pastor (Chris Hodges) is named President and Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation (COTH). Overseers are listed as men who can discipline the senior pastor if needed but they are not the local elders. They are men Chris has chosen and who live in other cities.

Two of the Overseers are two of Chris's mentors and former pastors, Ted Haggard and Larry Stockstill. Another is his father-in-law Billy Hornsby, and two pastors, Rick Bezet and Greg Surratt. Since these men are mentors and influencers of Chris, it was important to check out the theological perspectives of these men, which turned out to be revealing and definitely problematic in several areas. More on this momentarily.

The By-Laws position Chris over both the elders and the trustees as **he** is "primarily responsible for the spiritual life of the church…[and] to insure that the financial strength is directed toward the ministries of **his** choice." He is to "recognize and enlist apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, pastoral and teaching ministries (the "Five-Fold Ministry"), along with

that of elders, deacons, and additional staff members as **he** deems Biblical and necessary."

As the leader, Chris oversees all ministry offices, "may budget monies, hiring of employees, develop projects or ministry, create small groups…[all] according to **his** convictions and Biblical understanding." Also Chris is the one who selects and can dismiss any trustee. He alone "hires, directs and dismisses staff. He "determines all salaries and writes the pay scales for all full time salaried employees." He can also dismiss any elder or trustee "without cause."

In the 2001 By-Laws under Article 8, "Elders," it read, "The elders are men who function within the local church **but are not members of the pastoral staff of the church**." Chris appointed the initial elders but all subsequent appointments were to be made by the congregation, based on greatest number of "nominations." Chris could veto any nomination.

According to Article 13 of the By-Laws, the elders may bring the senior pastor under discipline if he demonstrates "immoral conduct, financial practices, or theological views in the opinion of a majority of elders. If the overseers are called in, 3 out of 5 must be in agreement before discipline is administered.

A concern I have is that Chris somehow arrived at another conclusion some time in 2002, and decided that the By-Laws were wrong, and that elders **were** supposed to be the pastoral staff members, who he appoints, rather than members of the congregation, nominated by them. So he replaced the elders with his pastoral staff. Strangely, when I asked one of the pastoral staff about this change, he wasn't aware of the change.

[Chris responded that the By-Laws "were not written well" and that the trustees, staff pastors, and overseers were all "elders" and that the congregation, or any of the elders could bring a charge to the 5 Overseers to be investigated, and that the congregation could exercise a "don't come, don't give" response if not satisfied.]

In 2002 the reported financial receipts were $1,329,433. In 2003 the receipts increased to $2,873,818, more than doubled. In 2001 a donation was made to the hard-core Word-Faith ministry, Rhema Christian Center. I have recently learned that this donation was made to a member of COTH who was going on a mission trip but was routed through Rhema.

Chris serves on the Board of Sav-a-Life, and the Association of Related Churches. He is also a new board member of the National Association of Evangelicals. The COTH now has three Sunday morning contemporary services at Mountain Brook High School, one satellite feed at their facility near Brook Highland, and one Saturday night service there. There are no Sunday schools but there is a Wednesday night teaching service.

A major focus is on small groups that "meet once a week in houses, businesses, restaurants, or at the church facility." Their focus is on "developing connections with those who share your interests or are dealing with similar life issues." These provide a very effective vehicle to reach out to others, believers and unbelievers where easy, felt need, natural affinity connections can be made with the various "stations in life." **But** depending on the content, spiritual depth of leadership and maturation opportunities, will these groups facilitate real, sustained growth?

The COTH is going through the process of trying to purchase property and build a 2500 seat sanctuary with Jan. 2006 as a target date.

MY CONCERNS

After reviewing all the COTH materials mentioned at the beginning of this paper, discussing issues with members, Chris, staff, and others, I have the following concerns. I will quote the sources of these concerns as well as Chris's response to many of them.

1. A commitment to the application of the 5-Fold ministry i.e. that the Church is to recognize the ongoing gifts of Apostles and Prophets (along with pastors, teachers, evangelists). These two particular "giftings" can become very problematic unless one has a balanced Biblical understanding.
2. Some of the people closely associated with Chris promote the problematic understandings and expressions of these two office/gifts.
3. The general lack of theological understanding of a number of important doctrines and practices by the leadership which is central in the calling and responsibility of leaders (2 Peter 3:16; 2 Tim. 2:15; 4:1-4).
4. Promotion of negative views of the importance of theology, sound doctrine, tradition, and any organized structure.
5. A negative view of seminaries. **[Chris responded that he has a very positive view of seminaries.]**
6. A wrong understanding of the gift of tongues, prayer language, and an elevation of the necessity of tongues for authentic, powerful Christian experience.
7. A repeated thread of negative teachings on the deadness of American churches and the COTH as being the recovery model. This with number 6 creates a "we vs. you," or a "have and have nots" mentality. **[Chris responded that he is deeply sorry for creating that impression and said he definitely does not believe that.]**
8. Apparent lack of clarity or understanding of the heretical Word-Faith movement and promotion of some of their significant errors.
9. The continued use of the Ezzo's materials on raising children. **[Chris responded - see later.]**

10. The heavy emphasis on the controversial Cleansing Stream Ministry whose focus on deliverance and spiritual warfare mixes truth with error.

11. An overall pragmatism that doesn't seem to want to draw lines, open to most views without theological discernment.

I believe Chris is right on some things but wrong on others. For instance, I agree that people who are very doctrinally oriented can begin to err by developing a relationship with Biblical principles or doctrinal principles instead of the living God who wants us to experience with Him while He is moving, saving, healing, transforming and doing the miraculous.

But, like John Calvin once noted, "sound doctrine without application is not sound doctrine." The living Word (Jesus) and the living Word (the Scripture) are co-joined to bring us life, discernment, power as we submit, surrender to the Holy Spirit and have our minds and wills transformed by the word of God with sound doctrine (Heb. 4:12-13; Eph. 4:17-23; John 8:31-32; Heb. 5:12-14; Rom. 12:1-2; I Pet.2:2-3).

I agree with Chris that Christians can and do quench the Spirit when we **over-emphasize** arguing/discussion over non-essential doctrines and sometimes over emphasizing even the importance of certain doctrines. For example, is premillennialism, amillennialism, postmillennialism, or dispensational pre-mil the correct view? Is there a pre-trib, mid-trib, post-trib rapture or is there no rapture? Too often we are circling the wagons, trying hard to maintain the lines of distinctiveness at the expense of unity, ministry, and keeping first things first.

In my own Reformed tradition there are frequently ongoing debates over not only eschatology, but Christian liberty, Sonship, apologetics approaches, theonomy, charismatic gifts, covenant and justification, counseling approaches, old earth – young earth, law and gospel, worship styles and content, subscription to the Confessions, Christian "hedonism", the degree of the incomprehensibility of God, and more.

Are these doctrinal issues important? Yes, some more so then others. But not if they promote contention and stifle us from intimacy with God, with our neighbor, our families, our brethren, the lost, our mission as salt-and-light-bearers in our culture. But it is also a fact that a better understanding of some of those doctrinal issues can enhance our walk with the Lord.

Frequently as I listen to Chris's teachings I keep thinking, "don't throw the baby out with the bathwater." But sometimes I think he is just wrong, especially when he tends to overemphasize experientialism as superior to, or even out of balance with sound doctrine. We are to love God with all of our hearts (the mainspring of all our thoughts, words, and deeds), **and** our minds (cognitively, intellectually, theologically), our soul (emotionally, experientially, the animating sum principle of life and body) as well as our strength (volitionally).

1. In part one of Chris's series on the Holy Spirit he stated that "there is major confusion in American churches today on the Holy Spirit which results in major hindrances which is keeping the Church from being effective. These are intellectual barriers.

He goes one to lay out the advantage he believes the COTH has in its understanding compared to other churches. He says "we started fresh – had no prior precedence – a fresh page – got to start over – no doctrinal baggage – if we just came to the Bible without any prior doctrinal commitments, we would come to Chris's understanding of the Holy Spirit – we just do what it says."

Chris states that the COTH wants to be an "authentic New Testament Church," and unless we have his view of the gifting of the Holy Spirit, we (other churches) are all lacking effectiveness and are without real power. Thus the logical conclusion reached is that those other churches are inauthentic.

He says the three hindrances are (1) ignorance of his proof-texts; (2) fear of giving up personal control to the supernatural; (3) doctrinal differences and hang-ups. Chris elaborates on this last one in a very disturbing way. He says it is "unhealthy for churches to have Statements of Faith (he says he wishes they didn't have to have one). He believes that "the Bible alone should be our creed."

This is overly simplistic, naïve, and presumptuous. It is reminiscent of the Churches of Christ whose pet saying is "Our only creed is not to have a creed – the Bible alone is our creed. We speak where the Bible speaks and we are silent where the Bible is silent." Yet they arrive at heretical doctrines that Chris's and all evangelicals would dispute. We are not to all "do what is right in our own eyes."

Church history, councils, traditions and creeds have Scriptural precedent, and the time-tested consensus of theologians and experience are very important to the Church. Otherwise we would have chaos, anarchy, and have to revisit and refight all the same old heresies that continue to try to enter the Church. He who doesn't learn from the mistakes of the past, is doomed to repeat them. And what about personal and corporate "prophesy" that Chris says is foundational to COTH? Is that consistent with "the Bible alone?"

Chris then attempts to lay out the scriptural (doctrinal) support for **his claim that the baptism of the Holy Spirit accompanied by speaking in tongues is subsequent to salvation and that everyone should and must receive it in order to receive real power in guidance, prayer, witnessing, warfare, holiness, discernment, and worship.** This is a foundational error in sermons, and at least in Church 101, 201 and the (3 hour) Leadership Training Class.

He even said that the witches he encountered in Colorado Springs all said that "the churches are a joke and the only ones they feared were the tongue speaking churches." Up to this point Chris is just repeating many of the same positions as the old Pentecostal – Charismatic church traditions. The only logical conclusion is that those of us who do not

speak in tongues (prayer language) are quenching the Spirit and lack real power.

There have been several controversial incidents involving the youth, having to do with pressure to get the prayer language, the casting out of demons, and disruptive behavior in a large group setting in school. Even my daughter was subject to some pressure and manipulation.

2. In part two of the Holy Spirit series, Chris reemphasizes his teaching saying, “The churches in America have become powerless and we are here at the COTH because we are tired of the ‘church thing.’” Chris repeatedly states that the COTH is to be an authentic New Testament church that is truly connected to the power source via the baptism of the Holy Spirit and tongues.

He disparages “doctrine, knowledge, wisdom, apologetics” by horribly misquoting and misapplying 1 Corinthians 2:1-7. Chris attempts to equate what Paul is saying about <u>uninspired, unregenerate, human</u> intellectualism and superior argumentation style, with Christians employing their minds with Spirit led and taught doctrine and wisdom (Ephesians 4:17-24; Hebrews 5:12-14; Psalm 119:97-105). This is another misapplication and misinterpretation.

The real question and issue here is whose doctrine do we listen to? Ironically Chris earlier said, “Don’t listen to me. You can’t listen to any pastor. Read your Bible and listen to the Spirit of God. He will show you.” So why is he spending so much time teaching his doctrinal positions and calling out frequently for supportive “Amens”?

In the “Bring it On” part one session, Chris repeats this dangerous refrain, “Men get into doctrines. I just say go live out what the Bible says. Forget your doctrine; figure out what your heart says. You don’t need a theologian, including me.”

This is a fundamental problem and contradiction repeatedly seen. How many times does the Scripture instruct us about the importance of our pastors, elders, and teachers being sound in doctrine as well as examples? Read Hebrews 5:12-14. Again, I don’t mean doctrine for doctrines sake, but “life-giving” truth. Yes we have the responsibility to test and to grow ourselves but it is not an either-or. There is also good counsel in the historical basis and development of our faith. This all serves as checks and balances.

This mentality surfaces is the COTH 24/7 program which is designed to prepare students for ministry. The prevalent attitude is that seminaries are a waste of time, counterproductive because they are really for professional theologians rather than life-trained, experienced ministers. All they do is turn out men who pastor small, stagnant churches.

Ironically (or contradictorily) Chris is attempting to **prove** his doctrinal distinctive **scripturally** (which he even commented on the contradiction of this process), he says the **real** way to “convince people of the truth is by power” displays. Again Chris is guilty of an either-or

fallacy. The Bible warns about counterfeit signs and wonders and power displays as well as counterfeit and false teachers. We need the combined truth of both doctrine and experiential power.

Chris even states that some will come and try to hinder your experiences with tongues and power by bringing doctrinal arguments against it. He repeatedly teaches that even Satan will use doctrinal arguments to fight it, because this is such a crucial doctrine and he doesn't want the church empowered, just confused. So the implication is that if anyone comes along to show from Scripture and Biblically based arguments (which by the way Paul repeatedly did and most of Scripture has that component), then they are from Satan. Yet again on the flip side Chris states how he loves to study and prepare (often 12 hours for his message), even trying to utilize the Greek (although wrongly) to distinguish apostle-overseer-elder-pastor-teacher.

3. Because Chris teaches that man is trichotomous, made up of body-soul-and spirit, one must bypass the mind, which is part of the soulish man, and experience sanctification directly through the "Spirit man," which was made perfect at regeneration.

Chris teaches that "God wants you to have all of His 'stuff' but it is too big for our fallen, limited mind so He by-passes it and goes to our already made perfect spirit. The mind can't stand it because it is not in control – wants to deny or refute it." So that's where the prayer language is necessary, praying in tongues. That's where the real power connection is made – the DSL or T-1 connection rather than the dial up. He repeatedly emphasizes this in several messages. He says, "most people want a relationship with God at an understandable level and therefore miss the best that God has." Read Romans 12:1-2 for starters.

4. Chris states that, "God has called me to be a bridge between the two worlds of God's Church and America's Church." He goes on to relate how he "is going to blow my cover." If someone asks him why they like the COTH so much, what is it? Why so different? He says they just know it's the "real deal" because of "the presence of the Holy Spirit." Chris reveals that because so many have doctrinal hang ups he doesn't tell them the secret. I believe this is unethical and manipulative. He seems to believe that if they have an experience, they don't need any reason.

But in a later message, (Bring it On, part one) he says, "We are not stupid. We don't put it up front (the necessity of the prayer language, tongues) because people are scared or nervous about it. But if someone asks me, I'll tell them." I don't know which Chris is accurate. But I do know of a Christian who had been attending COTH until Chris led an invitation to receive the baptism and gift of tongues following his second Holy Spirit lesson on Wednesday night. She asked him point blank, how could he say that those who did not come forward were not inferior Christians or something of that nature? Chris avoided answering her. Now Chris did make the one sentence comment in two of his messages

that “You’re not a second class Christian if you don’t receive the Holy Spirit (i.e. prayer language).” In a meeting with me he also repeated that disclaimer. But frankly that doesn’t stand up to the avalanche of material he lays out saying the opposite. Chris taught, “We can’t do [as a church] what God has called us to do without the Baptism of the Holy Spirit power.”

5. Chris’s teaching on the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues is somewhat unusual even in Pentecostal-charismatic churches. Almost all Charismatic theologians disagree with his view.

The usual theological disagreement surrounds (1) whether the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” is separate from and usually follows regeneration; (2) whether tongues are always the initial evidence of that baptism; and (3) whether the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the same as initial conversion which should be followed by subsequent fillings (empowerments) of the Holy Spirit (my view and the majority understanding); and (4) whether the gift of tongues ceased with the death of the apostles and completion of Scripture.

But Chris adds a new wrinkle. He teaches that the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 12 and the second half of 1 Corinthians 14 are a separate gift of tongues from a person’s personal prayer language in the first half of 1 Corinthians 14. The first gift of tongues is only for those to whom God gives it, and it is for the edification of the Body and for interpretation.

But the prayer language is for everyone to have which can be received at the Baptism of the Holy Spirit (usually is), and it is the key to really having the authentic, New Testament Christian life. One of the very few charismatics who hold that view is Jack Hayford from The Church of the Way in California, but he too is not a theologian (i.e. skilled in “handling accurately the Word of truth,” 2 Tim. 2:15).

I will thoroughly respond to this doctrine in part two of my paper but tactically I see why someone would hold this view. 1 Corinthians 12-14 correctively deals with an issue. The issue was that some were trying to elevate the importance of one spiritual gift over others. A special focus is on the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14. The word is clear that God gives different gifts to His children to be exercised in harmony. Who gets which gift is God’s choice and He tells us, “not all speak in tongues” (1 Corinthians 12:10-11, 30).

So in order to get around that refutation of that doctrine Chris wants to embrace, he has to create a different “gift of tongues” and tie it to the tongue events in Acts to make it appear normative for all Christians. But as I said, careful and respected theologians from all spectrums see the error of that. **[Chris responded indicating he would like some time to study this issue. He did say that this spiritual, tongue prayer language to God is not the only way to achieve power in the Christian life. But frankly, I am still trying to reconcile this disclaimer with the matrix of teachings I have read.]**

6. Another example of fostering a “we vs. you” mentality (which is affecting COTH members because a good number of the calls I get report COTH members telling their friends they need this), is when Chris relates his experience as a Christian cessationist prior to receiving the “baptism.” He states that he was weak before but then he received the “baptism” tongue power that everyone can have in order to be an overcomer - real power in worship, witnessing, etc.

7. 5-Fold Ministry and New Apostolic Movement—This is a controversial doctrine that the COTH embraces. There is actually a major movement within charismatic-Pentecostal circles that embraces it. There are various dimensions of this movement, some which are very heretical and problematic.

Because of where Chris and many of the founding group have come from, who they continue to relate to, some of the programs they utilize from this movement, and Chris’s response to my questions on this, I am very concerned.

The 5-Fold Ministry is based primarily on Ephesians 4:11-13, which teaches that the Lord “gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” Related passages are 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 2:20.

Again, there are a few serious concerns here. The first issue is whether apostleship and prophethood are living, continuing offices for the Church today, or are they merely functional giftings? In the case of offices, inspired authority must come with both those who are Apostles and Prophets. And who is to confirm those offices?

If one merely means that men have apostle-like gifting, i.e. are supernaturally empowered to plant on-going, fruitful new ministries, that is not a controversial position. But the issue of prophecy is far more problematic.

For example, are New Testament Prophets functionally the same as Old Testament Prophets? How does one confirm or verify false prophets because the New Testament is very clear that there will be false prophets and false apostles. They will be able to “perform great signs and wonders to mislead the elect” (Matthew 24:24; 7:15; 2 Corinthians 11:12-15).

The Body of Christ is called to test prophecies, to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21;
1 John 4:1). I personally believe the Scriptures teach that the office of apostle ceased as there were biblical criteria set that cannot be met today. Concerning the prophetic, I believe Scripture allows for God to

use people to speak through a direct message but the message is not equal to Scripture (truth for all people at all times), and if it is a false message, then that disqualifies that person as a prophet (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). Or, if a so-called "prophet" delivers doctrinal teaching that is unbiblical, or a predictive prophesy which does not come to pass, (s)he is then declared not to be a prophet.

But when I specifically asked a staff member (pastor-elder) and Chris himself, neither could give me either the criteria for how an apostle is determined, or how their functioning could be tested. Chris said he didn't "have any clear understanding of what constitutes those giftings." In fact, Chris said that he "didn't like the whole prophecy thing." It was too messy or controversial (although Chris indicated that he on rare occasions operates in that "anointing").

Yet in one of his messages and in one of our meetings, Chris referred to Frank Barker and Bill Bright (founder of Campus Crusade for Christ) as "apostles." Now the problem here is that neither of those two men have the "prayer language/gift of tongues" which would be absolutely necessary to be consistent with Chris's doctrine/teaching concerning that "gift." And I find it very disturbing for the leader of a church to say he believes in the 5-Fold Ministry as normative/operative in the Church, his church, yet claims to have no clear understanding of what those two are. **This is very important as we have seen serious problems arise in the churches that embrace and attempt to function in those areas.**

[Chris responded to this by saying he believes that the functioning of those gifts are still operative, not the offices. He reiterated that he does not know one apostle or prophet (office or function?). I am still a bit puzzled though as Chris did mention that he believes Frank Barker and Bill Bright functioned as an apostle. So in the earlier statement, did he mean office, in the 5-Fold? If so does that mean they <u>can</u> exist?]

One of those very controversial segments of the 5-Fold ministry is something called **The New Apostolic Reformation Movement (NARM),** led by Peter Wagner. This is a logical outworking of the 5-Fold ministry given the status of apostles and prophets in the Scriptures, at least at the onset of the Church. Wagner's premise is that the churches in America are dead or stagnant and that is due to a number of reasons such as: divisions over doctrine; lack of the power of the Holy Spirit; the absence of Spiritual warfare, especially demonic deliverance; seminaries are too focused on scholarly studies that are not relevant or practical and are therefore poor models for preparing men and women for real ministry; and most important, the churches must recover the foundation of functioning Apostles and Prophets and submit to their authority in order to fulfill the Great Commission and usher in the return of Christ. The NARM believes that it is a new God given paradigm that is to replace the denominational structures. This is a resurrection of an earlier heresy

called the Latter Rain movement that almost all charismatic-Pentecostal denominations repudiated including the Assemblies of God and Church of God (more on this in my second paper).

If you are noticing a congruency with the issues I've raised about certain teachings at COTH and Peter Wagner's New Apostolic Reformation Movement, then you are paying attention. But it gets even worse. Peter Wagner's headquarters is on the campus of Ted Haggard's New Life Church, where Chris served and Haggard is Chris's mentor and "overseer." Ted is on Peter Wagner's Board. He has a long history of sponsoring and participating in conferences of Wagner's School of the Prophets, and the International Coalition of Apostles (ICA). Yet Ted has claimed not to be an apostle and he, just this past year, distanced himself from Wagner. But he has recently endorsed one of the major "Apostles," in the NARM, John Eckhardt. He inscribed on the cover of Eckhardt's book, "John Eckhardt presents a genuine revelation of the role and anointing of apostolic ministry in the modern church. I highly recommend his book, *Moving in the Apostolic.*" And he certainly acknowledges accepting the Apostolic authority in his book, *The Lifegiving Church* (which carries the endorsements of several of the leadership Apostles of the ICA), writing that when he came to Colorado, God "would raise up strong and healthy life-giving churches that would have apostolic authority…". **[Chris responded that Ted could not have an exclusivist attitude as evidenced by him being President of the broadly evangelical National Association of Evangelicals.]**

Several pastors and others who know Ted Haggard well, told me that Ted has a long pattern of pragmatism and believe this recent distancing from Wagner has more to do with facilitating his new role as president of the National Association of Evangelicals as opposed to jettisoning his radical views. This includes a conversation I had with the pastor Ted refers to in his book as the man God told him was the "bishop" of Colorado Springs. Like Chris, theology is not Ted's strong suit. Even a casual reading of Haggard's book (which Chris said were basically the same beliefs that he has) will confirm all the concerns I have listed.

Ted believes in the continuing functioning of apostles and prophets in the local church. He recommends Wagner's book, *Discover Your Spiritual Gifts* in his 2002 book, *Dog Training, Fly Fishing, and Sharing Christ.* Haggard writes that prophesying is "Saying what God says," equating it with Scripture, calling it "the voice of God," and writes that we should "work with people with this gift" (pp.132-133). Yet in a letter dated April 7, 2003 Haggard wrote, "I do not embrace the modern prophetic movement represented by C. Peter Wagner, Chuck Pierce, Cindy Jacobs, and others, **nor have I ever."**

Yet, Ted is listed as a member of Wagner's International Coalition of Apostles (ICA) and membership is by invitation only. For years he has been a speaker in their conferences. In an address to Wagner's National School of Prophets in May 2000 at Colorado Springs, Haggard prayed,

"Father, I thank you for those who have the office of either a prophet or prophetess…we confirm the calling of the prophet – the calling of the prophetic." He also said in his welcome address to the conferees, that he was so appreciative of their attendance "to learn about the prophetic… and how to grow in the prophetic ministry," so they could go home and implement it in their own community. He goes on to explicitly indicate that Peter Wagner is "an apostle. I highly respect him both as an elder and as an apostle…he's got the authority of an apostle." Haggard then turns to Chuck Pierce, who is a major Prophet in Wagner's NARM, and states, "Everybody thank God for Chuck Pierce. Chuck has a prophetic anointing that I can't tell you how highly I respect it" (National School of the Prophets, "Mobilizing the Prophetic Office," May 13, 2000). This pattern goes far beyond a semantics issue. Wagner is also on record as stating that Haggard has the office of pastor-apostle, which Haggard says he never accepted, even though he was (is?) a member of the ICA.

[Chris did rightfully point out that he was not on staff at Haggard's church in Colorado when Haggard was entwined with Wagner and the NARM. Chris left there in 1994, several years before Wagner came there. But again, it is obvious that Ted has been very influential in Chris's life and ministry, and as Chris told me as he gave me Haggard's books, "If you want to know what we are doing, read these."]

Another direct connection to Wagner is COTH's 24/7 intern training program. For some time COTH's website describes 24/7 as accredited by Wagner's Leadership Institute (WLI) and their 24/7 program. Ted Haggard has a full page promotion of it in his book, *The Lifegiving Church.* In our third meeting, Chris revealed that 24/7 is no longer affiliated with the Wagner Leadership Institute. When I asked "why not," he simply said because Ted Haggard no longer is. Yet as of today, it still is listed as accredited by the WLI on their website.

Also there are additional connections with this controversial movement. Chris is on the Board of another ministry called the Association of Related Churches. The president of that organization and one of Chris's "overseers," and Chris's father-in-law, Billy Hornsby. On Hornsby's website he lists many of the books of Wagner's NARM radical (false) Apostles and Prophets, such as Bill Hamon, Jim Goll, Peter Wagner, Rick Joyner and an endorsement from the Word-Faith teacher Joyce Meyer.

There are other incidents that have been reported (first hand) happening that are unfortunately reminiscent of the heretical Toronto Blessing movement such as "holy laughter" and "spiritual orgasms" accompanying "praying in the Spirit."

8. In addition to all those parallels with Wagner's NARM we also find in the COTH **Cleansing Stream Ministry** which has a heavy focus on deliverance, binding and loosing demons from Christians, so-called generational curses, and something called **Spiritual Mapping** (ie. the identifying and binding of **Territorial Spirits** around the city). Let me hasten to say that I do believe that spiritual warfare is a significantly neglected ministry in the body of Christ and I believe that a Christian can be influenced and even controlled (not possessed) by the demonic. I have personally been engaged in those battles in my ministry and have seen the power of God work. I have been blessed to see God do the miraculous both over nature, in healing, and deliverance. Once when I was exposing some neighbors who were psychics who had gotten into the inner circle of the then Governor Hunt, I and my family and home came under heavy demonic attack. It wasn't my Reformed brothers whom I called in to help do battle. It was my charismatic brothers.

But I also have seen major exaggerations, an unbiblical preoccupation, Scripture twisting leading to error-filled approaches to Spiritual warfare as well that did more harm than good. Indeed some of the complaints and concerns about what has happened at COTH has involved these things. When I asked Chris if he believed in spiritual mapping he said he did but that wasn't a big focus at COTH. My question is if you really believe in it, that in order to release the barriers hindering the advance of the kingdom of God, then why wouldn't you be focusing on it. For the best study and Biblical treatment of this topic I recommend *Territorial Spirits and World Evangelism* by Chuck Lowe, a graduate of Oral Roberts and Westminster Theological Seminary and has been with Overseas Missionary Fellowship in Singapore as a teacher of New Testament Interpretation, theology, and theological research.

9. **Word-Faith leanings** – Because we were aware of a significant number of people who received spiritual counseling having been harmed by the Word-Faith (WoF) teachings at Bethany World Prayer Center (where Chris worked prior to coming here), and because of the COTH statement on health and prosperity in their Statement of Faith, and because of the concern expressed by a former member of the COTH who had been harmed from a multiyear experience with the heretical WoF movement, we called Chris to meet and get to know about each other.

We asked about this particular doctrinal perspective, and Chris said that they don't agree with the Hagin, Copeland, Dollar, Hinn, etc., doctrines. He said they teach "half-truths." But he said that we don't need to "throw the baby out with the bathwater" though. He said there is a neglect in seeking God for healing in the Church today. We didn't disagree with that, so we moved on. But later I heard his messages on the subject. They had the "bathwater" in them.

Also one of the staff is a Rhema graduate (Hagin's heretical school), but I must note that when I asked him about his education there, he said

that he regretted going there. Another staff uses material with the children from Church on the Move/Willie George, which has Word-Faith orientations.

So when I met with Chris the next two times, I revisited this question. I asked, "If speaking the 'command of faith' is essential for a healing or a miracle to occur, and 'it's not up to God, it is up to us,' then what is the problem when the healing doesn't occur? What is the difference between your view and prosperity, and that of the 'Faith' teachers (Hagin, Copeland, Hickey, Dollar, etc.)?"

Chris said, "You know I don't really know what those guys teach so I can't say how we're different, I can just say that healing is not some formula, some five steps." I have a hard time understanding how Chris can on more than one occasion say, "they teach half-truths" and then say "I really don't know what they teach," and "I don't agree with them." Especially when he approved Joyce Meyer in a sermon, and recently listed as one of their "Bible" studies, Kenneth Copeland's "Authority of a Believer" tapes. Copeland is one of the most overt heretics. If you "don't agree" and claim they teach only "half truths," then you must know what they teach! Also one of Chris's mentors/overseers Greg Surratt offers a class in his church on "the Authority of the Believer" by Kenneth Hagin, a big time WoF teacher. Chris also pointed to Joel Osteen as someone who holds the same view of the tongues prayer language, and Osteen is also a Word-Faith teacher.

In his third message on the Holy Spirit, Chris again is critical of the churches who don't emphasize signs and wonders, as churches that have "a form of religion but no power" (2Tim. 3:5). Of course this passage refers to a totally apostate church and not the typical conservative Church in America (which is probably best characterized in Rev. 2:1-5). Chris then noted that two-thirds of Jesus' ministry was devoted to physical healing and one-fourth to the casting out of demons. That adds up to 92% which leaves 8% for teaching, evangelism (although some of this is combined with healing and casting out demons), helping the poor, prayer, studying the word, and encouraging the brethren.

Chris goes further to teach, "if we are going to be like Jesus, then we ought to have pretty much the same ratio to our ministry to the way His ministry was…two-thirds praying for the sick, one-fourth ought to be casting out demons." First of all I dispute those percentages and secondly this is a continued display of not understanding the Word and counsel of God. Astonishingly Chris reveals the basis of his theology on healing and faith, "So kinda my position on all this is, I don't have a clue. I just know a few things that it does say and I just do it. And some of them get well and some of them don't."

The "few things" Chris thinks the Bible teaches on healing and the miraculous are five "principles," not a "formula." These principles are: (1) be totally available; (2) partnering with the Holy Spirit in lifestyle prayer; (3) get a vision for the miracle, seeing in the supernatural (create positive thoughts and not negative – like a positive confession); (4) speak

the command of faith. Chris elaborates by teaching that the wrong way to pray is to believe something like "God is sovereign God, it is up to You – if it be Your will, its up to You God." Chris states that we think this is a theologically correct answer but we "have it backwards." He teaches that God is always willing because healing in the atonement means its all been done, is available, and is now **up to us** to "decide," to "prophesy;" (5) involve yourself in the miracle to release the captive from their bondage. These last two "principles" were accompanied by frequent calls for supportive "Amens" from the congregation.

Chris reveals that he does embrace the Word-Faith doctrine, "So does everybody get well? No…because sometimes we just don't take it all, we don't get it all. And why? I don't know [disclaimer]. It's a faith thing and I really don't have it all figured out," but then Chris returns right back to qualifying results with the amount of faith.

10. Chris really seems to have a low view of God's sovereignty. He teaches "God is not in control of things here on earth. He works with suffering, giving us the ability to work with and through it…all good is from God, all bad is from the devil…God's will doesn't allow sickness!" This is actually a deeper, more complex and relevant doctrine that Chris paints with a thin veneer.

11. Another concern is a regular diet of the curriculum produced by Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo of Growing Families International (GFI). This curriculum has become more and more controversial around the country. Without going into lots of detail I can say that the Ezzos and their program have been highly criticized by John MacArthur's church where Ezzo resigned when pressured by the elders for the doctrinally faulty content of GFI materials. Ezzo was later excommunicated from another church on character and lack of accountability issues, condemned by the American Academy of Pediatrics, criticized in articles in *World* magazine and *Christianity Today* and by James Dobson's Focus on the Family, and Multnomah publishers ended their relationship with the Ezzos. And more… I will make our info packet on the Ezzos available upon request.

When I raised this question with one of the staff who taught some small groups on this, he wasn't aware of any controversy. When I asked Chris, he just passed it off and said how great the program was for his family, how it is one of the most popular small groups, and he loves it.

[Chris responded by saying that he has had a very positive 10 year experience using and teaching Ezzo's principles and asked me on what basis should he discontinue it? I asked if he was aware of the specific controversial teachings and he said yes, of the *Babywise* portion, but not of the other. He agreed to study the packet I would send him and reevaluate.]

In closing, I must repeat that there are some focuses that I really appreciate at the COTH, especially the passion for the lost and finding creative ways to reach out in relevant ways to the lost and struggling. Most of Chris's sermons on Sunday morning are biblically sound. I've heard a number of testimonies from people I know and love who are connected with COTH, of their teenagers, older children and friends getting "turned on" to the Lord for the first time. I have two friends who are members at COTH, who were formerly members of 2 other local evangelical churches, but left those because they couldn't get anyone to help them put together an outreach/Bible study/ministry in their community. But COTH members were ready and willing to be a part. Today those two ministries are growing and fruitful.

But still, the concerns speak for themselves. Initial growth must be protected and sustained. In one of my 2-3 hour meetings with Chris there happened to be a national church leader present who told me later that he told Chris that since he was not a theologian he needed some accountability locally and it was good for Birmingham to have an apologist around and it was good for Chris too. He recommended that Chris run some things by me for input. What I pray will occur is that we can form a group of pastors and leaders to have some local accountability and a synergy where we could learn from each other. **[I asked Chris if this would be something we could work out and he said yes. Praise the Lord!]** Pray with us.

To God be the glory,
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